



Laos

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. Some government officials committed abuses of citizens' religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In most parts of the country, officials respected the constitutionally-guaranteed rights of members of all faiths to worship, but within constraints imposed by the Government. Authorities in some areas continued to display intolerance for minority religious practice, especially by evangelical Christians. The Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the popular front organization for the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), is responsible for oversight of religious practice. The Prime Minister's decree on religious practice (Decree 92) is the principle legal instrument defining rules for religious practice. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious tolerance since it was promulgated, authorities used its many conditionalities to restrict some aspects of religious practice. Decree 92 institutionalizes the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. During the period covered by this report, local officials pressured minority Christians to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages. Such cases occurred in Savannakhet, Bolikhamsai and Luang Prabang Provinces and in the Saisomboun Special Zone. There were also two instances wherein a large number of persons were detained and evicted from their villages for their religious faith and several instances in which persons were arrested. Arrests and detentions occurred in Savannakhet, Luang Namtha and Vientiane Provinces. At the end of the period covered by this report, there were five known religious prisoners, all members of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), the country's domestic Protestant Christian church.

There were generally amicable relations among the various religious groups, although differences in religious beliefs among villagers led to tensions. Conflicts between ethnic groups sometimes exacerbated religious tensions. The efforts of some Protestant congregations to establish churches independent of the LEC caused strains within the Protestant community.

U.S. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. Government representatives discussed the need for greater religious freedom at all levels of the Government. The Embassy sought to encourage religious tolerance through dialogue. Following on the success of a joint Embassy-Lao Government seminar on religious freedom in 2004, the Embassy organized a second seminar in 2005 to promote religious tolerance with senior provincial and central government officials. The Embassy maintained frequent contact with religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 85,000 square miles, and its estimated population is 5.7 million. Almost all ethnic or "lowland" Lao are followers of Theravada Buddhism; however, lowland Lao constitute only about 40-50 percent of the country's population. The remainder of the population belongs to at least 47 distinct ethnic minority groups. Most of these ethnic minorities are practitioners of animism, with beliefs that vary greatly between groups. Animism predominates among some Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, as well as among Mon-Khmer and Burmo-Tibetan groups. Even among lowland Lao, many pre-Buddhist animistic religious beliefs have been incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice. Catholics and Protestants constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. Other minority religions include the Baha'i faith, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism. A very small number of citizens follow no religion.

Theravada Buddhism is by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with nearly 5,000 temples serving as the focus of religious practice and faith as well as the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland Lao villages, religious tradition remains strong. Most Buddhist men spend some part of their lives as monks in a temple, even if only for a few days. There are approximately 22,000 monks in the country, nearly 9,000 of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in a temple. In addition there are approximately 500 nuns, generally older women who are widowed, resident in temples throughout the country. The Buddhist Church is under the direction of a Supreme Patriarch who resides in Vientiane and supervises the activities of the Church's central office, the Ho Thammasapha.

Although officially incorporated into the dominant Mahanikai school of Buddhist practice after 1975, the Thammayudh sect of Buddhism still maintains a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly are

followers of the Thammayudh school, which places greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

In Vientiane there are four Mahayana Buddhist pagodas, two serving the ethnic Vietnamese community and two serving the ethnic Chinese community. Buddhist monks from Vietnam, China, and India have visited these pagodas freely to conduct services and minister to worshippers. There are at least four large Mahayana Buddhist pagodas in other urban centers and smaller Mahayana pagodas in villages near the borders of Vietnam and China.

The Roman Catholic Church has 30,000 to 40,000 adherents, many of whom are ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in major urban centers and surrounding areas along the Mekong River in the central and southern regions of the country. The Catholic Church has an established presence in five of the most populous central and southern provinces, where Catholics are able to worship openly. The Catholic Church's activities have been more circumscribed in the north, although there are signs the government is permitting a revival of the Catholic community there. Three bishops, located in Vientiane, Thakhek, and Pakse, were able to visit Rome to confer with church officials. The Government has not permitted a fourth bishop, assigned to the northern part of the country, to take up his post in Luang Prabang, but did permit him to travel to the north periodically to visit church congregations. The Church's property there was seized after 1975 and there is no longer a parsonage in that city; the bishop remains in residence in Vientiane. An informal Catholic training center in Thakhek is preparing a small number of priests to serve the Catholic community. Several foreign nuns have served temporarily in the Vientiane diocese.

Approximately 300 Protestant congregations conducted services throughout the country for a community that has grown rapidly in the past decade. Church officials estimate Protestants number as many as 100,000, although actual numbers are probably closer to half this figure. The LFNC recognizes two Protestant groups: the LEC, which is the umbrella Protestant church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The LFNC requires all Protestant groups except Adventists to operate under the LEC's overall direction. Many Protestants are members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups, especially the Khmu in the north and the Brou in the central provinces. Protestants also have expanded rapidly in the Hmong and Yao communities. In urban areas, the LEC has attracted many lowland Lao followers. Most LEC members are concentrated in the Vientiane municipality, in the provinces of Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Bolikhamsai, Savannakhet, Champassak, Attapeu, and in the Saisomboun Special Zone, but smaller congregations are found throughout the country.

The Seventh-day Adventist congregation numbers fewer than 1,000 followers in Vientiane City and Bokeo Province, and one small Hmong community in Xieng Khouang province.

All approved Christian religious faiths own properties in Vientiane City. In addition the LEC maintains properties in Savannakhet and Pakse. Two informal churches, one English-speaking and one Korean-speaking, serve Vientiane's foreign Protestant community.

Within the LEC, some congregations have sought greater independence and have forged their own connections with Protestant groups abroad. As the LEC has grown, an increased diversity of views has emerged among adherents and pastors, and one or two groups quietly have sought to register with the LFNC as separate denominations. Two of the more active of these "underground" denominations are Methodists and Jehovah's Witnesses, both of which have unsuccessfully sought official government approval for their activities. Other denominations that have some following in the country include the Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, the Lutherans and the Baptists. Although the Prime Minister's Decree on Religious Practice establishes procedures for new denominations to register, the Government's desire to consolidate religious practice for purposes of control has effectively blocked new registrations.

New guidelines issued by the LFNC in early 2004 require all other Protestant denominations wishing to establish congregations in the country to do so under the aegis of the LEC. In theory denominations not registered with the LFNC are not allowed to practice their faith. These unregistered "independent" churches expressed concerns about being forced to cease activities. Authorities in several provinces, including Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang, used threats of arrest to force some independent church congregations to return to the LEC, but in other areas authorities allowed independent churches to conduct services without hindrance.

There are approximately 400 adherents of Islam in the country, the vast majority of whom are foreign permanent residents of Middle Eastern and Cambodian (Cham) origin. There are two active mosques in Vientiane that minister to the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam.

The Baha'i faith has more than 1,200 adherents and 4 centers: 2 in Vientiane Municipality, 1 in Vientiane Province, and 1 in Savannakhet. A small number of Baha'is also live in Khammouane Province and in Pakse City. Small groups of followers of Confucianism and Taoism practice their beliefs in the larger cities.

Although the Government prohibits foreigners from proselytizing, some resident foreigners associated with private businesses or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) quietly engage in missionary activity.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, local authorities in particular sometimes violated this right. Article 30 of the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, a fact frequently cited by Lao officials in reference to religious tolerance. Article 9 of the Constitution, though, discourages all acts that create divisions among religions and persons. The Government interprets this clause restrictively, and cites it as a reason for placing restrictions on religious practice, especially those belonging to minority religions. Although official pronouncements accept the existence of different religions, they emphasize the potential to divide, distract, or destabilize. Local and central government officials widely referenced Article 9 as justification for prohibiting such religious activities as proselytizing.

A person arrested or convicted for religious offenses has little protection under the law. Persons detained may be held for lengthy periods without trial. Court judges, not juries, decide guilt or innocence in court cases, and an accused person's defense rights are limited. All religious groups, including Buddhists, practice their faith in an atmosphere in which application of the law is arbitrary. Certain actions interpreted by officials as threatening may bring harsh punishment. Religious practice is "free" only if practitioners stay within tacitly understood guidelines of what is acceptable to the Government.

The Lao Government typically refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing on the part of its officials, even in egregious cases of religious persecution. Blame is inevitably attributed to the victims, rather than the persecuting officials. In some cases, officials concoct patently unbelievable explanations for events in order to exonerate local officials.

In 20 articles, Decree 92 establishes guidelines for religious activities in a broad range of areas. While the decree provides that the Government "respects and protects legitimate activities of believers," it also seeks to ensure that religious practice "conforms to the laws and regulations." Decree 92 reserves for the LFNC the "right and duty to manage and promote" religious practice, requiring that nearly all aspects of religious practice receive the approval of the LFNC office having responsibility for the village or district where the activity occurs.

The rules legitimize many activities that were previously regarded as illegal, such as proselytizing, printing religious material, owning and building houses of worship, and maintaining contact with overseas religious groups. However, in practice the Government is able to impose restrictions on religious activities through the required LFNC approval.

Both the Constitution and Decree 92 assert that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and instructing believers to be good citizens. The Government presumes both a right and a duty to oversee religious practice at all levels to ensure such practice fills this role in society. In effect this has led the Government to intervene in the activities of minority religious groups, particularly Christians, on the grounds that their practices did not promote national interests or demonstrated disloyalty to the Government.

Although the State is secular in both name and practice, members of governmental institutions are by-and-large followers of Theravada Buddhism, the religion of the majority of the ethnic Lao population. The Government's exemption of Buddhism from many of the Decree 92 restrictions facing other organized religions and its promotion of Buddhism as an element of Laos' cultural and spiritual identity give Theravada Buddhism the status of an unofficial national religion. Many persons regard Buddhism as both an integral part of the national culture and a way of life. The increasing incorporation of Buddhist ritual and ceremony in State functions reflects the elevated status of Buddhism in society.

In some areas where animism predominates among ethnic minority groups, local authorities have actively encouraged those groups to adopt Buddhism and abandon their "backward" beliefs in magic and spirits. The Government discourages animist practices that it regards as outdated, unhealthy, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of infanticide of children born with defects or of keeping the bodies of deceased relatives in homes. Aspects of nontraditional religious beliefs have penetrated Protestant congregations in some areas. In Xieng Khouang Province, a Hmong Christian congregation adopted apocalyptic practices in its worship service. According to provincial authorities, these beliefs led a senior church member to kill his wife late in 2003, predicting her resurrection in three days. Officials from the LFNC later asked the Seventh-day Adventist Church to incorporate this Hmong congregation into its community to bring its doctrines into line with an approved denomination.

Although the Government does not maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See, the Papal Nuncio visits from Thailand and coordinates with the Government on assistance programs, especially for lepers and persons with disabilities.

Muslims in the small Islamic community were able to practice their faith openly, attending the two active mosques. Daily prayers and the weekly Jumaat prayer on Fridays proceeded unobstructed, and all Islamic celebrations were allowed. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj. Groups that conduct Tabligh teachings for the faithful come from Thailand once or twice per year. Since 2001, the Government has more closely scrutinized the activities of the small Muslim population but has not interfered with the community's religious activities.

The small Seventh-day Adventist Church, confined to a handful of congregations in Vientiane and in Bokeo Province, reported no government interference in its activities in recent years, and its members appear to be free to practice their faith.

The Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Vientiane and Savannakhet Cities practiced freely, but smaller communities in Khammouane and Savannakhet Provinces faced restrictions from local authorities. The Baha'i assembly in Vientiane also encountered difficulties establishing its ownership of the Baha'i center in Vientiane, where authorities refused to acknowledge the assembly's deed to its property. Baha'i local spiritual assemblies and the national spiritual assembly routinely hold Baha'i 19-day feasts and

celebrate all holy days. The national spiritual assembly in Vientiane meets regularly and has sent delegations to the Universal House of Justice in Mount Carmel, which is in Haifa, Israel.

There is no religious instruction in public schools, nor are there any parochial or religiously-affiliated schools operating in the country. Several private pre-schools and English language schools receive support from religious groups abroad, however. In practice many boys spend some time in Buddhist temples, where they receive instruction in religion as well as in academics. Temples traditionally have filled the role of schools and continue to play this role in smaller communities where formal education is limited or unavailable. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Catholic Church, operate Sunday schools for children and young persons. Baha'i spiritual assemblies conduct religious training for children as well as for adult members.

The Government observes two religious holidays (Boun That Luang and the end of Buddhist Lent) and the Buddhist New Year in April. It recognizes the popularity and cultural significance of Buddhist festivals, and most senior officials openly attend them. The Government generally permits major religious festivals of all established congregations without hindrance. In the past local officials in some areas have obstructed Christian congregations' observance of religious holidays such as Christmas.

The Government requires and routinely grants permission for formal links with coreligionists in other countries. In practice the line between formal and informal links is blurred, and relations generally are established without much difficulty.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government's tolerance of religion varied by region and by religion; evangelical Protestants associated with the LEC continue to be the target of most restrictions. Although not subjected to harassment, the Buddhist hierarchy is observed closely by the Government. The Buddhist Supreme Patriarch, or Sangkarat, maintains close links to the Government. As a result of the Government's decentralization policy that diffuses power to provinces and districts, central government control over the behavior of local officials is weak. Local officials are often unaware of government policies on issues such as religious tolerance due in part to the absence of rule of law coupled with the incomplete dissemination and application of existing laws and regulations. The LFNC at times visited areas where religious persecution had taken place in order to instruct local officials on government policy and regulation. More often, the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own and in accordance with Decree 92.

The larger urban areas such as Vientiane, Thakhek, Pakse, and Savannakhet cities experienced little or no overt religious abuse, according to religious leaders in those areas. The large Protestant and Catholic communities of several provinces, including Xieng Khouang, Khammouane, and Champassak, reported no difficulties with authorities. Relations between officials and Christians in these areas were generally amicable. Throughout the country, however, religious practice reportedly was restrained by official rules and policies that allowed properly registered religious groups to practice their faith only under circumscribed conditions.

Between 1999 and 2001, local authorities closed approximately 20 of Vientiane Province's 60 LEC churches, primarily in Hin Hoep, Feuang, and Vang Vieng Districts, and approximately 65 LEC churches in Savannakhet and Luang Prabang Provinces. With a more relaxed policy of religious tolerance beginning in 2002, most of these churches were allowed to reopen, particularly in Vientiane and Luang Prabang Provinces. However, officials in several districts of Savannakhet Province did not allow local congregations to reopen 5 or 6 of Savannakhet's approximately 40 churches. Officials in Khamisan Village continued to refuse permission to the village's LEC congregation to reopen their church, which was closed in 2003. Officials in Muang Feuang district of Vientiane Province continued to deny permission for LEC members to reconstruct a destroyed church in Phone Ngam village. During this reporting period, the Government quietly allowed a handful of new churches to be constructed, including the first Catholic church built in northern Laos since 1975, a Catholic church in Bolikhamsai Province, and four new LEC churches in the Saisomboun Special Zone and Bolikhamsai Province. Vientiane Province authorities also permitted LEC Christians to rebuild a destroyed church in Phone Ngam Village. Several provinces also permitted some Christian congregations to expand or renovate long-standing churches, in contrast to the past policy of denying all such requests.

As many as 200 of the LEC's nearly 300 congregations do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in members' homes. Since the promulgation of Decree 92, officials from the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department have taken the view that home churches should be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible. At the same time, village and district-level LFNC offices often refused construction of new churches, and home churches remain the only viable place of worship for most LEC congregations. The LEC encountered difficulties registering new congregations and receiving permission to establish new places of worship or repair existing facilities. The Baha'i congregation in Savannakhet's Dong Bang village was not permitted to construct a spiritual assembly building.

In addition authorities required new denominations to join other religious groups with similar historical antecedents despite clear differences between the groups' beliefs. In March 2004, the LFNC's Order Number 1 required all Protestant groups to become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The order states that no other denominations will be permitted to register, a measure to prevent "disharmony" in the religious community. In at least two provinces, Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang, authorities used threats of arrest of senior church leaders to force "independent" churches loosely affiliated with the U.S.-based United Methodist Church to return to the LEC. In other areas of the country, however, independent churches were allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities.

The authorities remained suspicious of patrons of religious communities other than Buddhism, especially evangelical Christian groups, in part because these faiths do not share the high degree of direction and incorporation into the government structure that Theravada Buddhism does. Some authorities criticized Christianity as a Western or imperialist "import" into the country. In the past decade, the LEC suffered the brunt of local-level efforts to close churches, arrest church leaders, and force members to renounce their faith. The LEC's rapid growth over the last decade, its contact with religious groups abroad, the active proselytizing on the part of some of its members, and its independence of government control contributed to the Government's suspicion of the Church's activities. Some authorities also interpreted Christian teachings of obedience to God as signifying disloyalty to the Government and Party. The fact that the LEC is comprised mostly members of ethnic Mon-Khmer tribes and the Hmong, two groups that historically have resisted central government control, contributed to the Government's distrust of the LEC.

During the period covered by this report there were no reports of official interference with or denial of permission to hold religious celebrations, nor were there any reports of security forces stopping vehicles during Sunday worship hours to prevent villagers from traveling to attend worship services.

Longstanding restrictions on the Catholic Church's operations in the north left only a handful of small congregations in Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha; however, there were signs during the year that the Government was easing its control over the Catholic community in the north. The Government permitted more frequent visits by the Bishop of Luang Prabang to the north to conduct services for the scattered Catholic community there, but it continued to restrict his travel. There were no ordained Catholic priests operating in the north. Several church properties, including a school in Vientiane, were seized by the Government after 1975 and have not been returned, nor has the Government provided restitution. During the period covered by this report, authorities allowed Catholics in Ban Pong Vang of Sayaboury Province to construct a new church with assistance from the Papal Nuncio office in Bangkok. This was the first Catholic church built in the north since the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. In the central and southern parts of the country, Catholic congregations practiced their religion freely.

The Government prohibits foreigners from proselytizing, although it permits foreign NGOs with religious affiliations to work in the country. Foreigners caught distributing religious material may be arrested or deported. Decree 92 specifically authorizes proselytizing by Lao citizens, providing the LFNC approves the activity. In practice, the authorities interpreted proselytizing as an illegal activity that creates divisiveness in society. Authorities sometimes seized religious tracts and teaching material from Lao Christians entering the country from abroad and arrested and expelled foreigners attempting to proselytize.

Although Decree 92 authorizes the printing of non-Buddhist religious texts and allows religious material to be imported from abroad, it also requires permission for such activities from the LFNC. The LFNC did not authorize Christian or Baha'i denominations to print their own religious material, although both groups have been seeking permission to do so for several years. Some believers bring religious material into the country; however, these persons face possible arrest. Because of these restrictions, some approved Christian congregations complained of difficulties in obtaining Bibles and religious material.

The Government generally does not interfere with citizens wishing to travel abroad for short-term religious training; however, it requires that such travelers notify authorities of the purpose of their travel and obtain permission in advance. In practice many persons of all faiths travel abroad informally for religious training without obtaining advance permission or without informing authorities of the purpose of their travel. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually grants exit visas, but on occasion it refused travel permission to persons going abroad for what it regarded as suspect activities.

Identity cards do not specify religion, nor do family "household registers" or passports, two other important forms of identification. On occasion authorities withheld new ID cards or household registers from Christians because of their religious beliefs or threatened to withhold official documentation unless they renounced their faith.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities continued to arrest or detain persons for their religious activities. Most detentions that occurred during the period covered by this report were short, varying from a few days to a few weeks. At the end of the period covered by this report, there were five religious prisoners: two in Oudomsai Province, two in Savannakhet Province, and one in Sayaboury Province. Conditions in prisons were harsh; like other prisoners, religious detainees suffered from inadequate food rations, lack of medical care, and cramped quarters.

In 1999, authorities arrested two members of the Lao Evangelical Church in Oudomsai Province, Nyoht and Thongchanh, and charged them with treason and sedition, although their arrests appear to have been for proselytizing. Nyoht was sentenced to 12 years in prison and Thongchanh to 15 years. The men remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

The largest single detention incident during the reporting period took place in Muang Phin District of Savannakhet Province in late February and early March 2005, when local authorities reportedly detained 24 ethnic Brou Christians associated with the LEC at the district police office for several days in order to force their renunciation of faith. All but two of the men recanted their faith. These two men were still being held at the end of the reporting period. Local officials claimed the two men, Khamchanh and Vanthong, were arrested for trying to sell military ammunition and that their arrest had nothing to do with religion. These authorities also denied that other Brou Christians had been detained and forced to recant their beliefs, in spite of affidavits signed by all of those Brou attesting to their detention and mistreatment.

In late 2004, authorities arrested two ethnic Yao Christians in Long San District of Vientiane Province for proselytizing, according to LEC sources. These two Yao, a brother and sister, were released in early May 2005 following more than six months' incarceration. Vientiane authorities denied the arrest was for religious reasons and stated that both had been arrested for having refused to pay a debt. Authorities arrested a second pair of ethnic Yao in Luang Namtha Province in August 2004 for proselytizing and held them for several months. Officials in Sayaboury arrested an LEC pastor in June 2005, claiming that he had criticized members of the provincial administration. He remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

In July and August 2004, authorities in Kasi District, Vientiane Province, detained four LEC Christians for several months. The LEC maintained that they were detained because of their religious activities. Provincial and district authorities claimed the detentions were related to the four men's involvement in a scam to extract money from local villagers.

Forced Religious Conversion

Efforts by local officials to force Christians and (in at least one example) Baha'i members to renounce their faith continued in some areas. In some cases, officials threatened religious minorities with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply, and on two occasions they acted on these threats. In October 2004, officials in Ban Phiengsavat village of Saisomboun Special Zone reportedly expelled a group of nearly 70 ethnic Khmou Christians after they refused to give up their religious beliefs. The short-notice expulsion forced the families to sell their possessions -- including houses and livestock -- at prices significantly lower than the market rate. Military trucks transported the families to Sayaboury Province, from where they had moved several years previously. Provincial authorities in Sayaboury refused to accept the group but did negotiate for their resettlement in next-door Luang Prabang Province. Central government authorities later claimed the group had settled "illegally" in Saisomboun and that its expulsion had nothing to do with religion, despite the fact that non-Christians from this same group were allowed to remain in the village.

In February 2005, a second expulsion of Christian villagers took place in Ban Kok Pho Village of Bolikhamsai Province, only a short distance from Ban Phiengsavat. As with the first village, local authorities in Ban Kok Pho told the ethnic Khmu Christians that they would be expelled if they refused to give up their religious beliefs. Authorities forced more than 100 Christians in the village were to liquidate their possessions on short notice before transporting them by military vehicles to Vientiane City, apparently in preparation for sending them on to the northern part of the country. Vientiane City officials intervened in the expulsion, and, following several days' negotiation, Bolikhamsai Province agreed to take the group back. As with Ban Phiengsavat, central government authorities blamed the problems on the Christians, whom they said had settled in Bolikhamsai without permission several years previously. However, officials allowed Ban Kok Pho inhabitants who had renounced their religious faith prior to the expulsion were to remain in the village.

Officials in other communities also threatened Christians with expulsion if they refused to abandon their beliefs, but they did not act on these threats. Christians in Ban Nam Thuam Village of Luang Prabang Province, Yang Soung and Dong Nongkhoun Villages near Savannakhet City, and several villages of Muang Nong and Muang Phin Districts in Savannakhet Province reported expulsion threats from local officials over their religious beliefs.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government's record of respect for religious freedom, particularly toward Christian minorities, continued to be marred by problems at the local level, with incidents of persecution occurring in many provinces. In general, however, the climate of religious tolerance during the last several reporting periods improved.

In its official pronouncements in recent years, the Government called for conciliation and equality between religious faiths. The LFNC continued to instruct local officials on religious tolerance. Officials from the LFNC traveled together with representatives of the LEC to several provinces to promote better understanding between LEC congregations and local officials.

The LEC continued to conduct an active program of public service during this reporting period, providing developmental assistance and organizing social welfare projects in several areas that had previously experienced religious intolerance. In conjunction with the LFNC, the LEC conducted meetings with provincial officials in Xieng Khouang, Luang Namtha, Oudomsai, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane Provinces and the Saisomboun Special Zone to improve understanding between local officials and LEC communities.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

For the most part, the various religious communities coexist amicably. Society places importance on harmonious relations, and

the dominant Buddhist faith generally is tolerant of other religious practices. There is no ecumenical movement to date. Lao cultural mores generally instill respect for longstanding, well-known differences in belief. However, interreligious tensions arose on rare occasions within some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to proselytizing or disagreements over rights to village resources. Efforts of some congregations to establish churches independent of the LEC or associated with denominations abroad have led to some tensions within the Protestant community. Frictions also have arisen over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians, to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador cited the promotion of religious freedom as one of her priorities after her arrival in Vientiane. She raised the issue of religious freedom in calls on all major figures in the Government. The Ambassador also spoke directly about religious freedom with provincial governors in her visits to the provinces. In some cases, the Ambassador wrote directly to central government and provincial officials on religious freedom cases. At an Embassy-sponsored seminar on religious freedom, the Ambassador addressed Lao officials on the importance of religious tolerance. Other Embassy officers discussed religious freedom with a range of central and provincial officials.

The Embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Department of Religious Affairs in the LFNC. The Embassy informed the LFNC of specific cases of arrest or harassment. The LFNC in turn used this information to intercede with local officials. Embassy representatives met with all major religious leaders in the country during the period covered by this report. Embassy officials actively encouraged religious freedom despite an environment restricted by government-owned and -controlled media.

For the second year, the LFNC co-hosted with the U.S. Embassy a seminar on religious freedom issues, aimed at senior district and provincial officials as well as officials from the central government in Vientiane. Approximately 90 officials from all the provinces and the central government attended the day-long seminar. Officials from the LFNC and from the U.S.-based Institute for Global Engagement conducted the sessions.

During the period covered by this report, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor visited Laos and met with senior government officials to discuss religious freedom and other human rights issues. Visiting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia-Pacific Christopher Hill also raised religious freedom in his meetings with senior Lao officials. The Embassy supported and encouraged the visit of the president of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), an NGO devoted to promoting religious freedom. During a weeklong visit in February and March, the IGE president traveled to LEC communities in Xieng Khouang Province and met with senior officials in Xieng Khouang and Vientiane Provinces and at the central government level. The Embassy actively encouraged such high-level visits as the most effective tool for eliciting greater respect for religious freedom from the Government. The Embassy also posted on its website material relevant to religious freedom in the country.

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